

Loneliness and isolation in 'a streetcar named desire' and 'brooklyn'



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Loneliness and isolation are themes explored in various differing ways throughout Tennessee Williams's play 'A Streetcar Named Desire' (1947) and Colm Toibin's novel 'Brooklyn' (2009), mainly through the way their protagonists are presented and developed.

In 'Brooklyn' and 'A Streetcar Named Desire', loneliness is caused by the changes in culture and location each protagonist faces. In 'Brooklyn', Toibin depicts how Eilis is thrust from her quaint life in Ireland into the alien and bustling world of Brooklyn, New York City. Toibin himself, an Irish-born writer, had been a victim of homesickness during his long stay in America, which gives the reader insight as to how much of himself Toibin wrote into Eilis. Toibin comments that, "I found America a strange, alien, hostile place". These feelings he shares with his character, Eilis. Ireland did not prosper in the post-war boom like many other Western Europe economies - they were still suffering the effects in the 1950s, when this book was set - and there was a mass exodus of young men and women to England and North America in search of work. Not only had Eilis' three brothers immigrated to England, it's evident that there is little work available for someone with Eilis' potential, therefore she is encouraged to seek better employment in America. However, this change comes ever so suddenly for Eilis, leaving her struggling to catch up with the events unfolding around her. Before she leaves her home in Ireland, however, in Part One of the novel, it occurs to her that, "she was already feeling that she would need to remember this room, her sister, this scene, as though from a distance". This reveals that before she's even undergone this cultural change and environmental displacement, Eilis is already separated from her family and her life in Ireland. "As though from

a distance" reinforces the notion that she is already mentally removed from where her body remains. Similarly, in 'A Streetcar Named Desire', Williams illustrates how Blanche had quite a traumatic experience when she moved to New Orleans to live with her sister. While not technically a foreign land, it felt like it was to Blanche - she was, like Eilis, a complete outsider. Blanche was the only one of her class and background, besides her sister. While Eilis was referred to as a 'ghost' in her setting, in the first scene Blanche's appearance is described as, "incongruous to this setting". The adjective 'incongruous' connotes to 'odd' and 'incompatible', and while it may not have the sharp sting that comes with the imagery of the noun 'ghost', it certainly foreshadows what is to be one of the reasons for Blanche's downfall - her alienation and isolation in the unfamiliar setting. For both Eilis and Blanche, they are outsiders thrust into an unfamiliar world, and it damages them psychologically.

This damage manifests itself different ways for each protagonist. In the novel, as Eilis' tries to adapt to Brooklyn life, the isolation only becomes more apparent, manifesting in the form of homesickness, whereas in the play, Blanche's loneliness leads to a dependency on alcohol and a near nervous breakdown. In 'Brooklyn', as critic Christopher Taylor of The Guardian puts it, "Tóibín patiently dramatizes Eilis's homesickness" - referring to how it is a gradual process; Eilis initially tries to act as normal, going to work and talking with the others in her boarding house, but her actions are hollow, like stones skimming along the surface of a pond. The idea of separation and being ghost-like appears again; as Toibin states in Part Two, "She was nobody here. It was not just that she had no friends and

family; it was rather she was a ghost in this room, in the streets on the way to work, on the shop floor. Nothing meant anything." The noun 'ghost' is a deceased being that still wanders the earth, a fragment of its former self, unable to leave this realm on its own volition. For Eilis to think of herself as a ghost shows the devastating psychological impact homesickness can have; she's trapped in the nothingness of her own existence. "Nothing meant anything" is somewhat existential, separating Eilis from reality and claiming her as a victim of depression due to her seemingly never-ending loneliness. In 'A Streetcar Named Desire', Blanche, too, fell victim to depression and, as these feelings of isolation build up, she is left on the cusp of a nervous breakdown and quickly forms a dependency on alcohol. Williams shows the audience how Blanche makes herself dependent on other people, and when they abandon her (or she pushes them away), she's forced to rely on alcohol as a substitute to keep herself together. Thus, in Scene 9, Williams notes that she is "drinking to escape". In this context, the verb 'escape' refers to how she wants to escape the "rapid, feverish polka tune" that overwhelms her mind. By saying that the tune is 'feverish' means that it is 'frenetic', 'manic' and 'overwrought', a collection of adjectives that demonstrates how the tune is steadily driving Blanche insane. As Brooks Atkinson, a drama critic for the New York Times at the time of Streetcar's premiere on Broadway, commented, "out of nothing more esoteric than interest in human beings, Mr. Williams has looked steadily and wholly into the private agony of one lost person [Blanche]."

What Blanche really longs to escape from, however, is her lonely existence. It's the same thing Eilis wants to escape from. Thus, for both protagonists in

both texts, they find a coping mechanism to their loneliness in the form of male company and blossoming love. In the novel ' Brooklyn', Eilis eventually meets Tony, an Italian-American who rapidly fills up her lonely life with kindness and love. Once she falls for Tony, her feelings of isolation and homesickness start to fade away. However, when she is forced to return to Ireland, life interferes with her established coping mechanism. It is quite clear she has feelings for Tony, as when back home in Ireland, in Part Four, Toibin says that, " all [Eilis] could do was count the days before she went back". Like Eilis, Blanche longs for a man in her life, though Williams presents her as going about it with much more desperation than Eilis, resorting to intimate encounters with strangers in The Tarantula Arms, as they were, " all [she] seemed able to fill [her] empty heart with", as remarked in Scene 9. The use of the adjective ' empty' connotes to ' hollow' and ' abandoned', and garners sympathy for Blanche's tragic character who's heart - the vessel of love - is empty. She's a protagonist wrapped in fantasy and romantic ideals of a bygone era, but in the harsh reality of being widowed and stuck in New Orleans, her true loneliness is really accentuated. Critic Melanie Skiba labeled Blanche as the " incarnation of human loneliness", and the admittance of her past only serves to endorse that claim.

While she turns to brief sexual encounters to keep her loneliness and depression at bay, Blanche's primary coping mechanism seems to be her efforts to find a romantic partner in the hopes of quashing the loneliness inside her. This comes in the form of Mitch. Mitch comforts Blanche by confiding in her that he, too, is alone, and proposes that if they are together

then neither of them will be lonely anymore, commenting to Blanche in Scene 6: " You need somebody. And I need somebody too. Could it be-you and me, Blanche?" Here, Williams implies that Blanche and Mitch's relationship is built out of necessity and it being mutually beneficial, rather than true love, which is reaffirmed when Stella asks Blanche in Scene 5 if she wants Mitch, to which Blanche replies, " I want to rest", not answering decisively one way or the other. Hence, such a tenuous relationship broke apart very easily after Mitch finds out the extent of Blanche's deception. When Mitch breaks up with Blanche in Scene 9, she is pushed back into loneliness. In ' A Streetcar Named Desire', Williams presents an accurate portrayal of the restrictions placed on women's lives in 1940s postwar America. Being written in 1947, the attitudes present in the play were present at the time of Williams' writing. His use of Blanche's and Stella's dependence on men exposes the treatment of women in that era of American history. Both Blanche and Stella see male companionship as their only way to security and happiness, which is why Blanche is so desperate to find a partner, and so lonely and depressed when she cannot.

Blanche puts obstacles in the way of her finding a partner. Williams shows her building walls for herself, while Toibin's Eilis, on the other hand, builds bridges. In the novel ' Brooklyn', Toibin shows this with Eilis' commitment to move forward in life, despite the effects of her isolation in Brooklyn. Her strength is shown in her adaption, while Blanche wallows in weakness. Regarding coping with her homesickness, Eilis knew that, " no matter how bad she felt, she had no choice, she knew, but to put it all swiftly out of her mind. She would have to get on with her work if it was during the day and go

back to sleep if it was during the night. It would be like covering a table with a tablecloth, or closing curtains on a window." In part of this metaphor from Part Two of the novel, Eilis is the table to be covered with a tablecloth. One uses a tablecloth to protect what's underneath or to hide any damage; Eilis wishes to put on a façade to cover up her damage in order for her to continue with day to day life, hoping that the pain would go away on its own if she " put it all swiftly out of her mind". Unfortunately, Eilis' façade proves just as damaging as Blanche's, for it only acts like painting over cracks in a crumbling foundation - the underlying problem of homesickness and loneliness does not go away. Hence, it's a relief for Eilis when she finally finds a crutch in Tony and Jim to help fend off her isolation and subsequent depression. While Toibin comparing Eilis to a tablecloth seems like a simple metaphor on the surface, it adds layers to Eilis' character subtle but effective ways. Toibin's literary devices are often subtle and written with a great deal of ambiguity, which John Mullan of The Guardian comments on by saying, " the author's stylistic restraint is in imitation of his protagonist's self-restraint". This hints that he believes that Eilis and Toibin are one in the same in terms of inconspicuousness. The fact that ' Brooklyn' is written in the third person detaches Eilis from the reader, thus isolating her from the reader.

Once back in Ireland in Part Four, Toibin depicts Eilis quickly assimilating herself back into her homeland and culture; she's an outsider now that she's associated with the glamour of America, which Eilis enjoys, but she opts not to tell anyone about her marriage to Tony for a long while. This gives her the freedom to pursue Jim, a man that gives her companionship and fulfillment

during her stay in Ireland. Keeping this secret to herself forces Eilis to be isolated inside her own mind. Soon enough, Eilis falls for Jim, and is thrust into a moral dilemma between two lovers. Whilst at her friend's wedding, she has a realization: " It occurred to her, as she walked down the aisle with Jim and her mother... she was sure that she did not love Tony now." The imagery of her walking down the aisle with Jim alludes to their suitability for marriage, breaking Eilis further as she is so close to the marriage and life she has always wanted, but now cannot have, due to her marriage to Tony. As critic Dr Jennifer Minter puts it in her English Works (2014) critical essay on ' Brooklyn': " Eilis will now have to make choices between two desirable options, which means that once again the decision to return to Brooklyn will lead to loss but for different reasons. She now has a great deal more to lose. Foreshadowing a renewed cycle of loneliness and isolation" - no matter her choice, sorrow and isolation is in her future, just like it is with Blanche in ' A Streetcar Named Desire'.

In conclusion, Blanche DuBois and Eilis Lacey succumb to depression due to their change in circumstances, and both share a similar need to overcome their loneliness and isolation through the comfort and companionship of others. In the end, however, both cannot escape their loneliness in one form or another. Eilis may come out of the situation better than her ' A Streetcar Named Desire' counterpart, but she still sacrifices a life with the friends and family she has grown up with and is ushered back to Brooklyn to be the wife of someone she isn't completely sure she loves anymore. She's isolated herself from everyone she's ever loved and from the future she still secretly longs for. Blanche, on the other hand, in my opinion, is written as the more

tragic of the two - her loneliness drives her to near madness, and every chance at companionship she is offered falls apart. As Philip Weissman concludes when quoted in ' Criticism on A Streetcar Named Desire: A Bibliographic Survey, 1947-2003': " Blanche DuBois' fear of loneliness and abandonment is probably based on a disturbance of early object relationship", referencing her late husband's Allan's premature death. Since then, she has floated by, wrapped in fantasies and quests for companionship that mask her loneliness. She's never been ' whole' since the death of her late husband, and is doomed to a tragic and lonely existence, even though she obviously deserves better.